The Elba Clipper

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Streetcar makes move to Elba after years of display in Mobile

The streetcar attained and moved to the City of Elba, through a MainStreet Alabama grant, made it to its new home last Thursday morning, April 17. This new "display" location is between the parking lot and levee behind the Rabbit Hole restaurant in downtown Elba [at the Pea River bridge on Davis Street].

According to Elba Mayor Tom Maddox, the streetcar was built by the Elba Coach Company in the mid 1890's and was used by the City of Mobile until the early 1900's. It was restored in the 1960's and displayed on the grounds of the Mobile Civic Center until recently, but with plans for a new event complex on the site of the Civic Center, it was losing its home.

A plaque at the display identified it as "Mobile's Last Mule Car".

"The City of Mobile had pondered renovating and keeping the streetcar but finally decided to give it to the City of Elba if we wanted it," Mayor Maddox said. "Gordon Howard Prescott, a 1957 graduate of Elba High School, living in Stockton, Alabama learned of this and contacted us and helped in the process of getting it moved to Elba."

This streetcar built in the 1890's now on display by the levee in downtown Elba after making move from City of Mobile. The streetcar was placed in it resting spot last Thursday morning, April 17, where it will now be renovated for permanent display. Elba Mayor Tom Maddox, right, and Elba MainStreet director Sandy Williams, center, were joined by officials from the Alabama Department of Tourism last Thursday to celebrate the arrival of the streetcar.

The Elba Coach Company was formed by Jackson Lafayette "Fate" Prescott who also served as Sheriff of Coffee County from 1884 until around 1892. He started the Elba Coach Company and the J. L. Prescott Livery Stable in 1893. He was also one of the initial stockholders in the Elba Improvement Company Inc. in 1897.

"We are excited to have this piece of history on display in Elba," the mayor said. "We did not have a good place to do renovations, so those will be done with the streetcar in place. If you would like to help with the cost of renovations, please see Sandy Williams at the Chamber of Commerce."

Grant funds being used on this project are administered through the Elba Chamber of Commerce and Elba MainStreet.

The article shown below appeared in the Mobile Press Register on July 14,1963

By WAYNE GRISSETT
Press Register Reporter

Mr. and Mrs. W. C. (Bill) Martin of 1785 Staples Rd. have undertaken the great challenge of restoring an old Mobile relic—a mule-drawn streetcar.

The beginning of this adventure spans a century of time, at least.

The mule-drawn car on which they are working is approximately 100 years old, and which, when it was completed in the mid-19th century, is believed to have been the property of a Mr. Prescott of Elba, Ala., who in turn sold it to the White Line Street Car Co. of Mobile.

THREE ROUTES

At that time three mule car routes were serving Mobile. One extended to the top of Spring Hill via Old Shell Road. Another served the Toulminville area and the third went to Monroe Park and Frascati.

It was something of a sport in Mobile at one time to out-walk-or-run the mule car from Monroe Park to Mobile Station. According to historical accounts, the pedestrian usually won the race.

It also was something of a thrill to take the trip to Spring Hill.

A double-yoke of oxen was kept at the foot of the hill for the sole purpose of pulling the car to the top.

On the return trip, gravity took over and the resulting downhill run was something comparable to today's ride on a roller-coaster.

On one occasion when the descent was not quite as it should have been, a passenger was thrown from the car as it ran off the track. The story is that he was compensated. For the next year he could ride the mule-cars free—if he cared to, or dared to ride.

On the occasions when the cars jumped the track, every male passenger aboard was expected to lend a shoulder and by brute force lift the car back on the track.

During the War Between the States, the mule cars are supposed to have stopped running—for the simple reason that the army took all the mules—and most of the men, too.

After the war the mule-drawn streetcars were returned to use but then ran into competition from the Dummy Line which utilized a steam-powered car.

The competition was short-lived and the steam cars vanished, leaving the mule cars a clear field until the 20th century and the arrival of the electric car.

One of the cars remained about, sitting in the weather and going to ruin. There were several attempts to rebuild the car but usually interest was lost.

Now the Martins have taken over, and even though the venerable coach will not make its way through the streets of Mobile again, it shall serve as a reminder of early transportation.

The restoration would not be a particularly difficult task if diagrams or plans were available. The Martins have made exhaustive attempts to locate the correct information so that an authentic restoration can be made.

A plate on the car carries the name—The Elba Coach Co. The city clerk of Elba, Harold Deal, was helpful. He checked and reported the company went out of business many, many years ago. No information was left concerning the coaches built or bought by the company.

Because there were no plans available, the car was taken apart and each piece marked according to section and number of pieces in the section. This method is similar to some painting kits today where the one doing the painting fills in with the paint to correspond to the numbers.

Some of the bolts created a problem within themselves when they were approached to be removed. The rust around the grooves prevented them from being easily removed. An oil solution was used in order to prevent them from having to be cut off. The Martins are trying to salvage as many parts as possible in order to keep the car as original as possible. It is estimated that the car will be approximately 80 per cent original.

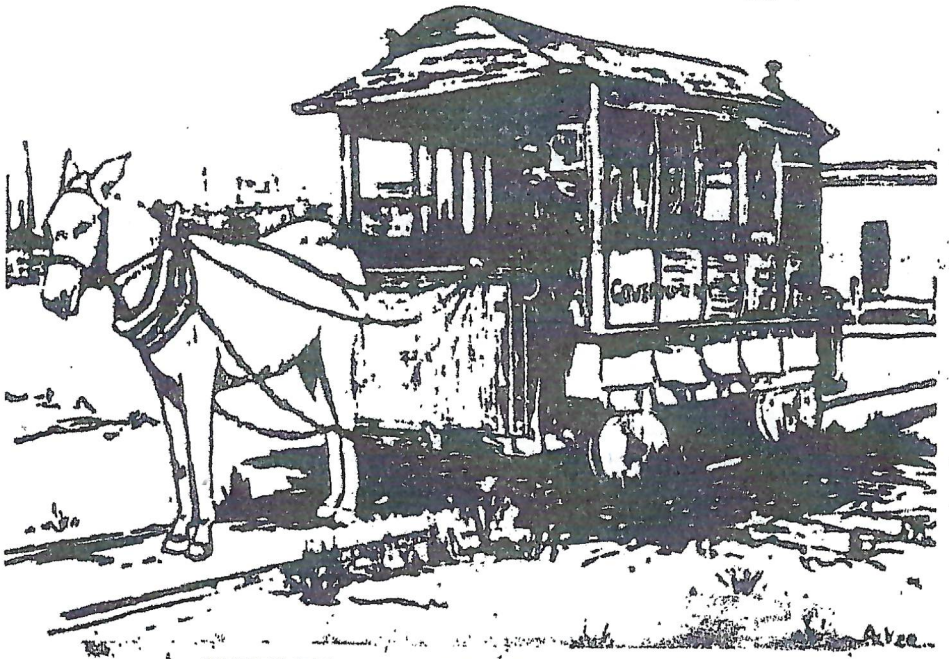
The car was a complicated piece of construction. The metal parts were cold-welded into place. The metal had to be heated and pounded into the position with the other parts and then allowed to cool before being handled by hand.

The Martins received the car in March, 1963. So far they have invested hours of their time in the reconstruction. It is estimated that it will be January, 1964 before the job will be completed. Martin spent the Fourth of July weekend working on the car.

For his time invested, Martin will receive no compensation other than enjoying his work. Anything to do with wood is a challenge for him. His hobby is woodcraft.

The Martins have been married for 13 years and have two children. He is employed by the City of Mobile.

And as they go about their task of restoring the old streetcar, the Martins would be happy to get any authentic information from residents of the area who might have information about this vehicle from the past.



MOBILE'S LAST MULE-DRAWN STREETCAR